

‘A man had two sons; he went to the first and said, “Son, go and work in the vineyard today.”<sup>29</sup> He answered, “I will not”; but later he changed his mind and went.<sup>30</sup> The father went to the second and said the same; and he answered, “I go, sir”; but he did not go.<sup>31</sup> Which of the two did the will of his father?’ *Matthew 28-31*

Some of Jesus’ most telling teaching was through the medium of parables; these simple stories, set in everyday life, with which people could identify; stories that related to experiences in their own lives that they could recall.

The parable in the second part of our Gospel reading would I suspect appeal to any parent who has asked a child to do something, only to come back an hour later to find it not done. Of course this sort of thing is not confined to children. How often can we look back on things we meant to do for someone and found ourselves realising that we had not done it. Or may there are other situations where we have been asked to do something that we resented and we have refused. Then later we have thought better of it and done what we were asked to do.

As we recall these incidents, Jesus, as he tells this story, invites us to reflect on similar attitudes we may have held in our response to God’s call upon us.

The second son, who in fact agreed to do what his father had asked and then not done it, is a symbol of what we might call ‘casual religion’. He was not insincere; he probably intended at the time to obey but there were other things on his mind and the father’s command was kept till later – and later never came.

The Christian faith appeals to our reason. We admire Jesus in his teaching and the cross even evokes a sympathy and a desire to follow. But today is too soon, the discipline of faith is too hard. So, like the second son, though we have promised to obey, we don't go.

The first son speaks of a different response to religion. He resented his father's call and went his own way. Have we not all at some stage resented God's intrusion in to our lives, resented his unreasonable demands fo forgiving those who have wronged us? Or maybe we have just dismissed the whole concept of God, of faith as irrelevant. And we have concentrated on what we saw as the more important things.

Then that first son repented. Maybe when the resentment eased, he looked again at the father's request and he did as he was asked. It takes courage to admit you are wrong and pride dies hard.

Like that son, we too are asked to look again at God's will for our lives, look again at the place we have given him in the scheme of things. This may come through the promptings of a parent, a teacher or a friend. I will always be thankful to the promptings of a teacher at school to re-examine my view of the world in which God had no place, in which faith was irrelevant. I also remember the gentle support of my mother as I began my own spiritual pilgrimage, as I belatedly followed the path God was calling me along.

What comes across to me in this, as I reflect on this parable, as I reflected on my own spiritual journey, is the importance of being prepared to take a second look at what God is saying to us.

Jesus gave this parable in the context of a deepening dispute with the religious establishment of his day. People who saw themselves as being in tune with God – yet whose attitudes and behaviour belied this. They looked down on the tax collectors and sinners of their own day whom they saw as far from God. Jesus points to their response to John the Baptist and his message. Rejected by the religious establishment, John's message of repentance was received by the very sinners they had despised. Jesus clearly identifies these same sinners with the first son who had initially disobeyed his father and then repented.

Unlike other parables of Jesus, in this instance the door remains open. The second son still has his chance to make good his promise to go and work in the vineyard. The chief priests and elders are not told that the Kingdom of heaven is closed to them; simply that the tax collectors and sinners are going in ahead of them. They still have the chance to listen again to John's message of repentance and take their own place in the kingdom.

I come back to this theme of 'listen again'. Maybe our life in the faith has lost something of its freshness. Maybe the very familiarity of the Biblical stories to us means that they have lost something of their cutting edge. Maybe we have just become discouraged or have inwardly dismissed it. The appeal of Jesus rings down through the ages; 'Listen again to what I am saying and enter into that peace that I have prepared for you.'